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**Author** Juste Venclovaite

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### **Abstract**

This work is a collection of eight essays and a poem that explores different aspects of the hand-size objects that are constantly present in the everyday human experience. The essays are related to each other but independent at the same time, and they could be read in almost any order, functioning both as parts of a full text and small reflections on different topics. The essays in the work cover the following topics:

Frequent appearance of a vase as an example object in illustrations of Plato's cave allegory and it's relation to what we imagine to be ordinary everyday life in ancient Greece.

The importance of size of the object in relation to the size of the hand: how size reduction objectifies not only inanimate but also living beings.

An example object - something that is chosen to illustrate the idea, but any other thing could take it's place just as well - the reasons of such choices.

A personal reflection on white edges often used around the stickers, and how they isolate the object depicted from the external world, at the same time turning it into a graphic sign.

Telekinesis - the utopian idea of being able to interact with objects without the mediator of a hand.  
Promises of card magic - a small poem about the rules and reassuring certainties in card manipulation.

Dichotomy between the subject and object, and the eternal fight between humans and things they have created.

A personal reflection on a metal paperclip stuck on a magnetite stone in a museum of mineralogy.  
A still-life as a combination of objects, and a difference between intentional and accidental still-lives. Groups of objects as a tool to convey a message, and a display of objects as a type of language.

The thesis does not aim to conclude or explain, but rather to explore and wonder, as well as draw attention to signification of things that are usually considered ordinary and self explanatory.

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**Keywords** objects, mundane, everyday, ordinary and extraordinary, hand-size objects, categorisation, object/subject dichotomy, chaos, order, signification, symbolism, language, mythologies

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# Between the Hands and Under the Eyes: Everyday Objects

the MA thesis

Justė Venclovaitė

Master of Arts program in Visual Culture

Aalto University School of Arts, Design and Architecture

department of Art

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## Introduction

This is a collection of essays about certain phenomena, in one way or another related to the nature of objects. I explore some curiosities of the physical everyday life experience, and am especially interested in finding out what is the ingredient of reality that makes things ordinary or extraordinary. While it seems that “objects” could mean pretty much anything, yet there is something that comes to mind when we say the word - most likely something common, everyday, and these are exactly the aspects that I research: what is common, what is everyday, and what is an object. Some aspects and significations I discuss I consider universal, some of them are perhaps more personal observations. I’m interested in the objects that are usually understood as common, usual, simple - they have become so typical to our surroundings, that their importance and their insignificance merge into one and the same thing, the difference between the two dissolves - they are like the air that we breathe, vital but at the same time invisible and rarely remembered. I am exploring what these objects are to us, to each other, and in general - what makes them mundane, and what part does the mundane play in our perception of the world, past and present. Object’s opposition with a subject interests me as well, and is a reoccurring theme in this work.

I mostly focus my attention to the things that appear and disappear in the space between the hands and under the eyes - hence the title - I believe this triangle(?) is what defines a daily human experience. Most if not all human activity is taking place in this microcosm. To be “civilised” is, basically, to be operating in this space daily, not only to obtain visual information, but also to deal with the physical world - to deal, not just observe - this area is where the actions are taken. Everyday life consists of endless and pointless juggling of objects, taking them from places and placing them elsewhere, arranging and rearranging, breaking and mending, combining and collecting, picking, sorting, holding, a lot of touching - all these actions follow their internal rules and has its exceptions, like grammar in a language does. I am trying to make sense of this juggling if not in a scientific, then at least in an observational or artistic way. I say that objects are what reality is made of, and objects are made of reality. However the main idea is to wonder, not to prove, and to suggest rather than claim, because one cannot solve something that isn’t a riddle or answer something that isn’t a question.

The essays in this work relate to each other in some ways and often arrive to similar conclusions, but they are not a direct continuation of each other. I do hope that the structure of the thesis reflects its topic in a way, as the essays can be treated as separate objects in a bigger composition. While reading them in order would probably be the best, they will not lose that much if read separately or at random. Similar to composing a still-life: while the aesthetic aspect of how objects are situated matters, not much would change if they switched places. The composition might suffer, but a lemon would still be present as a lemon even if barely

visible from behind a bottle, and a bottle would still be a bottle, even if clashing severely with the nearby flower vase of the same size and colour.

## Plato's vase

Plato's allegory of the cave, being an allegory that it is, was designed to represent the principle of how perception of reality might work, so naturally it does not focus on the details of content. The story is told in order to illustrate a philosophical point, so the means used to convey the idea are less important than the idea itself. However, the means, just like in any story, is very important for the imagination, and cannot slip through the readers mind without leaving any trace – the odd, cruel story about prisoners in a strange position, unable to move, dependant on mysterious others, with the purpose of this prank never explained. Even Glaucon, Socrates' listener in the original text, immediately expresses his feelings about the circumstances: "you have shown me a strange image, and they are strange prisoners". And then this hypothetical story follows with enlightenment of one of the prisoners, pain, separation and betrayal, that can't leave the listener emotionally indifferent to the means of conveying what essentially would seem to be primarily a theoretical point.

In the story, there are certain objects being carried by the puppeteers behind the fence. In a similar way like the story itself, these objects are just tools to illustrate a point. Themselves they are not important. And yet they represent the most important: reality, the real world. The prisoners, sitting in their immobile but apparently comfortable positions, are witnessing the shadow-play that for us, who know the truth (for we are outside of the story) are merely the shadows of our familiar, ordinary life. So what is ordinary life? How can it be expressed through the items manipulated by the puppeteers who dedicated their lives to this strange activity? Looking through visual representations of Plato's cave allegory, one can notice that in these illustrations the variety of objects being carried is in fact, not very wide. In illustration, differently than in text, the identities of objects are unavoidable to name. In a typical illustration, amongst examples of "statues and figures of animals made of wood and stone and various materials" (as is stated in the original text), as well as chairs and tables (if the image depicts a slightly more modern cave), there is one object seemingly so essential, so common in these drawings, that it attracts ones attention. That object is a vase, or in some instances an amphora, a "specifically Greek" vase.

I found it very interesting that we imagine the most familiar and ordinary object to ancient Greeks to be a vase. Even if it's not the main item being carried (besides statues of men and animals), there is very often a vase thrown in to ensure the "greekness" of the image. Thanks to museums and illustrated history books, a vase is so drenched into our collective imagination, that it's very tempting to visualise these ancient people living in the environment with amphorae decorating every corner. It is, in a way, a symbol of the ancient past, almost cartoonish image, which has been formed with the help of archaeology and nurtured in museums.

To be fair, however, it has to be said that „a vessel“ is actually mentioned in the English translation of Plato's *The Republic*. In several other language translations I looked into (like Lithuanian, Finnish, Russian,

French, Spanish and Portuguese) the vessel isn't mentioned at all, although there is something like „utensil“ („утварь“) in the Russian version. That's because the original Greek version contains a word “σκεύη” that I've seen translated into English as “utensil”, “article”, or sometimes “artefact”. „Artefact”, the word itself, is quite a modern notion and couldn't have had the same meaning back then: it is in present that we associate it with something ancient, archaeological, something protected behind a glass in a museum. Surely, it's just a thing of translation and it was not that word per se that Plato used. But it is an interesting exercise in imagination to visualise that word in the ancient text, meaning ancient objects as observed from the modern perspective. A time-traveller word.

Anyway, I think it is safe to say that „utensil“, „artefact“ or even „vessel“ does not automatically equal a vase. It could be anything. Or could it? The factors that come into play are: a) it has to be easy to draw, b) it has to be small enough to be carried in the hands above one's head, c) it has to be a casual, common every day thing, d) it is ancient Greece; therefore: it is a vase. It's also important to say that the vase is the only object in a shadow play that represents itself: other shadows that the prisoners see are not even of real things – they are shadows of representations, statues. They are not real men and animals, but they act, play, pretend to be men and animals. So the vase is the only honest one – an easy object, which was not made to trick, but to simply be itself and serve its function. Easy to use, it can be grabbed and mixed in between the others, to pass by almost unnoticed, as an example.

What is ancient Greece to us, who are neither historians nor archaeologists? Togas, columns, amphorae and olives? Stereotype may be a naïve thing, but it is inevitable: codes and symbols make things easier to recognize, less complex, easier to relate, even though it simplifying its subject a great deal at the same time. Roland Barthes examines a quite similar issue in his essay *Romans in Films*, where he talks about the way ancient Romans are depicted in Hollywood films. At some point, he focuses specifically on characters' hairstyles – all the characters in Mankiewicz's *Julius Caesar*, according to Barthes, are wearing fringes, which are no less than a device to make them more Roman.

„What then is associated with these insistent fringes? Quite simply the label of Roman-ness. We therefore see here the mainspring of the Spectacle - the sign - operating in the open.“ (Mythologies).

Even though there were plenty of other styles of hair and baldheads in Roman history, the fringe is the sign of Roman-ness, and so the vase is the sign of Greek-ness. It makes no difference how common vases were for real, or what was characteristic to the period *The Republic* was written – in the popular imagination these thousands of years have shrunk into several symbols. The case of the vase, however, is slightly different from the case of Roman fringes. The vase as a symbol has two layers, or perhaps functions: one is the Greek-ness, and another is the everyday-ness, the casual, the any object. It is essentially simple, it comes naturally to the illustrators, because of the same four above mentioned factors. But we have a vision of that ancient world, a vision that is hard to get rid of, and even though it doesn't always match the reality, it still keeps thriving, reinforcing itself repeatedly. Sometimes this vision meets challenges, for example: the recent discovery shows that the sculptures of Parthenon, and in fact, most likely most of the ancient Greek

sculptures, were painted in various colours. That quite prominently shatters the image we have about the classical Greeks and all that is related to it: whiteness of the marble, importance of pure form; and later mutations of the myth, like plaster copies-of-copies stacked in dusty rooms in art schools – everything appears in a different light. The signs we are used to recognise suddenly change their meanings – the ancients don't seem so surprisingly modern anymore, somewhat less sophisticated, not so minimal, less easy to relate to the context of the centuries of art that came after, influenced by those images. Indeed, what we know about the everyday life in ancient Greece (or in fact any life in the past) is by a big part our imagination, because no matter how many artefacts we excavate, no matter how well documented that world is, no science can fully cover the true everyday experience, which, we feel intuitively, can't be so different from ours, but just can't grasp in what way. Our image of it is mythologized and often idealised. This difference from nowadays mundane seems to be that, in some vague way, it used to be more sacred – even everyday their actions seem to be elevated over the ones we do now. Here is a quote that belongs to Henri Lefebvre:

“With the Incas, the Aztecs, in Greece and Rome, every detail (gestures, words, tools, utensils, costumes, etc.) bears the imprint of a style; nothing had as yet become prosaic, not even the quotidian, the prose and the poetry of life were still identical. Our own everyday life is typical for its yearning and quest for a style that obstinately eludes it.”

(Lefebvre, 1984, as cited in Highmore, 2002)

When Plato wrote “σκεύη”, was he also, like the illustrators, affected by the semi-subconscious urge of giving everyday objects as examples? Of course the Greek-ness aspect couldn't have affected him, but what made him use the word? If he wanted to stress the fact that the shadows visible are shadows of representations, that the things were specially made to imitate other things, to deceive, he could have stuck with statues. But he mentions a vessel, ruining the “representation of representation” pattern. It is a kind of slip of the tongue, without much meaning. We don't know what was the everyday experience of his day, what was the idea of “any, accidental object”, and could it be possible that this idea actually overlapped for with our modern idea of the “Greek object”. But the feeling that we can catch from this is even though the material things around us have changed so much, is that the basic interaction with the world around, the every day routines, choices probably weren't so much different in the way they worked.

Greece and antiquity aside, the Cave, from the perspective of Plato, exists in the hypothetical world. It's a world clean of bodily inconveniences (nutrition, survival of the prisoners), clean of unnecessary real life logic (the reason why). It is a world in theory, the realm of examples, the idea testing ground. It may not be Greece at all. Who can tell that Socrates meant it to be in Greece? And yet, much like the shadows are cast on the wall, in our minds, the imaginary Greece is casting its shadow on the nationless, neutral, ideal world of cave's allegory.





## Size

I'd like to talk about the importance of objects that are hand-sized. I think they seem so close to us, so natural, familiar, for a reason that can be put like this: the closer the size of the object is to the size of the hand, the easier it is to manipulate it. The way a thing relates to our hands and the way our hands relate to things play a major role in our physical interaction with the world. It all comes down to accessibility: our hands are so important in our relation to the world, that the area of our impact can be measured by an arm's length circle around us. How big the object is determines how accessible it is: we often underestimate how much size means, and how much power it has. To put it simply: if the object is smaller than us, it is in our power, whether if it is bigger than us, we are powerless against it.

I'd go as far as saying that actually it is size that makes an object. In daily life, one can hardly call something bigger than themselves an object – we are more keen to call it a building, a geological formation, or even a space, if it can or potentially could contain the perceivers body. If I ask you to think of an object, it is unlikely to be something bigger than a human; most likely it's going to be something lying on the table or being held in a hand. Big thing's objecthood is returned to it only in instances when its whole realm is perceived differently, from a kind of elevated point of view: a perspective of a giant. In military jargon, buildings, vehicles and other things on the terrain can be referred to as objects (as well as flying ones, hence UFO's, most famously), because they are part of a realm that's being observed, they are in the focus of interest. They can be called objects because of being in the zone that is open to manipulation, organization or control. Control is the keyword: the one we call „an object” is likely the one in our power, or at least we have intentions for it to be in our power. In military context, the one who refers to buildings as “objects” behaves as if he had an advantage of size: virtually feels able to have impact on them, pick them up, blow them up, change their location or condition, use them as tools for manipulating other objects. Size is a metaphor of force.

The image that appears in my mind is the picture from the eighth grade history book, a lesson about British imperialism in Africa in the 1800s. The illustration, which I later learnt was iconic, is known as “Rhodes Colossus”, and depicts British colonialist Cecil Rhodes as a giant standing over the Continent of Africa, his legs wide spread over the whole land, one foot resting in Cairo and another in Cape Town – the illustration was published after he announced plans for telegraph and railroad lines between the two cities. This visualisation of colonial power drives straight from the way our mind simplifies the situation: we know Africa is being divided, handled, therefore it must be either of manageable size, or the individual who is doing that must be a giant, for we are well aware that it isn't possible for a single ordinary man to do anything to a continent. This play of scales concerning countries is made easier by the existence of maps, as

they often appear in political cartoons where political leaders are cutting up continents, sharing them like cakes or trample countries under their feet. Because what is a map, essentially? It is a shrinkage of the territory to a size that's manageable. Manageable to an individual, a human being with two hands - without an army or machines to conquer real, vast lands, spacious and immeasurable by the eye. It's a simplification of things that are beyond one's physical control. In case of this illustration, however, Africa is not a map – it's depicted real size, as is indicated by the clouds surrounding Rhodes's body. He is a giant, he is standing over Africa „for real“, not playing with symbolic maps, the continent has not been diminished in order for him to appear bigger – he simply is that big, and the power he has is „true“.

In Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* the idea of power and size is quite prominently demonstrated, as the main character finds himself in two different scale worlds one after another, so it's possible to thoroughly compare the advantages and disadvantages of both, as well as how one's size affects one's field of possibilities of functioning in the world. The inhabitants of Lilliput are described as six inches tall, which is roughly 15 centimetres, the size of an average pencil, scissors, mug or other hand-fitting tool. This is the easiest size to handle for five fingers and a palm. Lilliputians are not simply slightly smaller than Gulliver in order to convey the idea that their nation is strange and different to the inhabitants of England – no, they are literally the size of the tools he uses, the most convenient size to handle. Physically, their size implies they are, or could be, at his disposal. It is made clear that Gulliver has no reason to fear them, because he could easily defeat them, even in great numbers, and this fact is acknowledged several times throughout the book. Gulliver knows his advantage. For instance, even after they treat him really well and give him food and drink, Gulliver nevertheless admits: „...I was often tempted, while they were passing backwards and forwards on my body, to seize forty or fifty of the first that came in my reach, and dash them against the ground.“ The reason that stops him from doing so is because he felt “bound by the laws of hospitality”. This unexplainable aggression would hardly be imaginable when facing somebody his own size. My point is that no matter how civilized and well-mannered one is, the natural advantage of mass and gravity working in one's favour is difficult to ignore, and is something that's always present in the minds of both the smaller and the bigger one.

Physical force versus morality is an ongoing theme throughout *Gulliver's Travels*, and it is interesting to observe how superiority, political or moral, is expressed there through the most natural physical metaphors: size difference. Respectively, when Gulliver finds himself in Brobdingnag, the land of giants, the situation is reversed and he can experience all the disadvantages of being a small thing within a „hand's reach“. Being aware of the dangers, he writes:

„<...>...as human creatures are observed to be more savage and cruel in proportion to their bulk, what could I expect but to be a morsel in the mouth of the first among these enormous barbarians that should happen to seize me? Undoubtedly philosophers are in the right, when they tell us that nothing is great or little otherwise than by comparison.“

He is powerless and has no control over his environment anymore. He can't even get off the bed without risking his life, for it is as high as a building. Even the tools betray him: their knives and forks are too big for him to use. That is a reminder of how important tools are to person's empowerment – not only they are extension of the body, they also are a part of a little personal world, where things are familiar and safe. Such is the world of tools – in it things can be easily rearranged without big consequences, they can be manipulated, applied to other things to achieve expected, convenient results, for example: holding a steak with a fork while cutting it with a knife, the cut-off piece, perfectly mouth-sized, remains pierced on the fork, and it's convenient and clean to put it in the mouth. This is as safe as knowing that rock beats scissors, scissors cut paper, paper beats rock. Only when this little world of certainty is taken away it becomes evident how reassuring it was. People like having their own order on their desk or in toolbox; this is a pleasure of organisation. Knowing that things are just the way you put them is calming, so is knowing that the tool is working the way it should. The man has created tools in his image. The whole civilisation was created by hands and for hands, it constantly is being created by tools – that were created by hands – to help make other tools. Tools are helpers, but every servant always enslaves his master a little, too, by making him dependant on their services. This happens to Gulliver, as he loses the power to manipulate the man-made surroundings. Things characteristic to his comfort zone has changed into something alien yet still painfully recognizable. He becomes paranoid, seeks solitude, and is afraid of children („well remembering how mischievous all children among us naturally are to sparrows, rabbits, young kittens, and puppy dogs“). His fears are based on experience to the meaning of which he was oblivious before, when it didn't concern him. In the face of trivial reality turned dangerous, he has to revalue his habits and his understanding of the physical world, because he is no more the user of things, now he is one of the things.

Reduction of scale does have a power to objectify. For example, the well-known image of a woman being held in a hand of King Kong makes us perceive her as a doll, something like a tool or a plaything. Without doubt, there is the aspect of her objectification being related to her sex, this layer exists and can't be ignored. A damsel in distress, a powerless woman (who happens to wear an elegant dress, for she was kidnapped straight from the performance) is contrasted with crude brutality of the beast, and one could say that the possibility is open for the viewer to identify with a giant ape, that King Kong is the male gaze personified, a power fantasy come true. However, I am talking more about the mere fact that she is being held: just like we have seen matchboxes or cups being held, we've done it ourselves, we know how a hand functions, and it affects our perception of her. This idea of her being an object is reinforced by the nature of special effects in the movie, where the method is alternated between having either a fake woman or a fake hand, so at times the woman really is represented by a doll: this is the only way these two different scale worlds (the human scale and the King Kong scale) can meet on screen. Actually, there are two options for the viewer: to identify with humanity and imagine what it would be like to see a creature so much bigger than familiar surroundings, or to identify with a monster and experience what it would be like to perceive big objects as small, to hold a woman in a hand, or climb a building. While the first experience is more awe-inspiring and adrenaline filled, the latter is a very tactile one, personal, slightly more intimate. Seeing King Kong fighting off planes on top of the skyscraper suggests us to see planes as toys - we can't help but remember that this is

a movie, a constructed reality, but at the same time we are filled with simple joy of fighter planes being so laughable, and wonder how much strength it would take to beat them. Unlike to Gulliver, our world to King Kong is new and meaningless. The size of the monster allows him into another kind of reality, reality of different textures inaccessible to us, where steel pipes break like matchsticks and humans are fragile and light (what is the texture of her silk dress, and what's the sensation of her strength as she's trying to unbend the fingers of his fist?).

Violence is always an ingredient in the confrontation between big and small. Even when it isn't extreme or literal, it's still there as something that can be foreseen. For instance, a popular tourist photo perspective trick when people take photographs next to famous landmarks, placing the camera in such a way that the building, statue or another person looks small, fitting on the person's palm. A person often pretends to hold, squeeze or support the object, which in reality is too big for doing that. Playful as these pictures are, isn't the secret joy of superiority a big part of this? Somehow, a change from bigger to smaller is always regarded as a loss, and shrinking of the monument or building makes them less serious, more approachable, toy like. It is a way of owning that object. These tricks give one the power of giant movie monsters, to play god in the most innocent way. When the shrunken object is a human being, as is sometimes seen in campy wedding pictures, there is a slight flashback to the Swift's quote about children being mean to sparrows and kittens – somehow you can tell, from the facial expression of the bigger party, that this isn't going to end well. In case of monuments, the very act of taking a picture is already a declaration of „I was here“, and „manipulating“ a monument with ones hands is absolutely owning it. Look, I can crush Big Ben. A variation of this idea is well illustrated in a legend, popular among Lithuanians, about the church of Saint Ann in Vilnius. The church is a famous architectural monument notable for its gothic beauty, and is one of the symbols of the capital city. The legend has it that when Napoleon Bonaparte with his army was passing through Vilnius on his way back from Moscow, he was apparently so impressed with the beauty of this church, that he exclaimed that he'd like, if that was possible: „to take it on his palm and carry it with him to Paris“. While many Lithuanians regard this legend as a compliment to Vilnius's architecture, reality wasn't so romantic - the church was used by Napoleon as a warehouse for his cavalry's needs, and as a result much of its wooden inventory, like confessionals and benches, were burned by the French soldiers. Once again admiration of something didn't clash with a desire to own it and even with the destruction of the said object. (I want to note, however, that while it may seem appropriate to mention Napoleon in the text about size and power, it has been said that, contrary to the popular belief, Napoleon wasn't a short man for his period of time: it was his enemies that spread rumours about his conquests as a compensation for his height. Why was it important for the enemies to spread these images, again tells us a lot about how lack of size/height is perceived as a humiliating disadvantage.)

Such symbolic illustrations of imperialist hunger like Napoleon and the church, Cecil Rhodes and the continent, serve as metaphors of the same urge to control the uncontrollable, to render things into organizable objects in order to „have the world in ones hands“. I feel that perspective pictures are not so far away from this mindset as they seem, although in a light-hearted way. They speak about our zone of

influence: a zone shaped like a circle around us – and objects that are in it; relatable, controllable, convenient, ready to serve, safe.

For the end, here is a quote from the last and ultimate coloniser:

"It suddenly struck me that that tiny pea, pretty and blue, was the Earth. I put up my thumb and shut one eye, and my thumb blotted out the planet Earth. I didn't feel like a giant. I felt very, very small."

- Neil Armstrong





ITS UP TO YOU



TO KEEP THEM UP

Centaur











## Example

„I speak, therefore, a chair”

Blaze Pig (a YouTube comment)

Let's say, we are talking about some phenomenon, a trait, an idea, a hypothetical situation – something abstract that isn't present here and now, or immediately visible. We want to demonstrate it, but that phenomenon is defined by verbs or adjectives rather than nouns, so it doesn't translate well into the visual world. Places for (grammatical) subjects in our sentences would be left blank, which would cause our speech to be interrupted by gasps of speechlessness, so we have to fill them in with something – even though there is no difference whatsoever what with – in order to make sense. So we use examples.

We are aware of the insignificance of these example objects, sometimes even accompanying the utterance of their names with a gesture that expresses unimportance. They can be anything, as long as they don't have a too prominent personality colourful enough to steal the spotlight from the main idea. These objects are only carriers, vessels in a specific shape that prevents the main structure of meaning from collapsing, their contents don't matter. But what are they? What incarnation is taken by something that doesn't really matter?

In philosophy classes, lectures, language courses, grammar books and dictionaries, and so many other situations that needs an example, it very often incarnates into, let's face it, a chair, a desk, or a lamp. I am not saying this is always a rule, but the odds of somebody saying something like: “for example, I know this is a chair...” in a philosophy lecture are insanely high. In a foreign language class we learn: a chair is in front of a desk, a chair is behind a desk, a chair is next to a desk... It seems like these things are so much a part of our reality, that they have become a part of our brain furnishing. It's true that often a person would give this example simply looking around them and naming what he sees: there is even a slang expression in Lithuanian, „from a lamp“ or „out of a lamp“, which means the idea was conceived supposedly at random, „out of the blue“, or without any preparation. The phrase probably implies the subject looking up and around while thinking of what to say. While „out of the blue“ indicates outdoors, „from a lamp“ indicates an indoor situation, environment in between the four walls full of things manufactured by man - a standard situation so familiar to a typical civilised individual, to which philosophers are no exception, if not the best example.

„My life shows that I know or am certain that there is a chair over there, or a door, and so on. - I tell a friend e. g. "Take that chair over there", "Shut the door", etc. etc.“ (Ludwig Wittgenstein, On Certainty)

„Two worldless beings can certainly be beside each other (one thus says, for example, that the chair is near the wall), and we can even say that one touches the other. But to speak of touching in the proper sense

of the word, for the chair to be truly near the wall (in the sense of Being-already-alongside-the-world), the chair would have to be able to encounter the wall.” (Giorgio Agamben on the meaning of Dasein, in *The Passion of Facticity*)

“The language of this lamp, for example, communicates not the lamp (for the mental being of the lamp, insofar as it is communicable, is by no means the lamp itself ) but the language-lamp, the lamp in communication, the lamp in expression.” (Walter Benjamin, *On Language as Such and on the Language of Man*)

Thinking about behavioural side of it, the situation is reminiscent of word association games, where visual/audible stimulus is presented, and unprepared reaction is the key to interpreting the answers. It's always interesting to wonder about what enters the mind when one is not given much time to think, construct defences and devise plans - it becomes even more mysterious when no stimuli are presented. From the psychological standpoint, the issue is very cloudy and speculative, because there is no definite way to know how the mind works from individual to individual, and the achievements of psychology concerning word association, understandably, remains more guidance than exact science. This ambiguity is widely utilized in other areas, for example, mentalism - a branch of magic entertainment sometimes called mind reading – which is a mixture of pseudo psychology, classic conjuring, science of probability, blind chance and taking advantage of a natural human tendency to jump to conclusions. It often plays with the idea that people are predictable, which is something everyone internally wonders, fears, or perhaps hopes. The basic premise of a typical mentalism trick is to ask a spectator to think of or choose any word, number, letter, card or object, depending on a situation. The way trick goes varies, but usually in the climax the performer is able to name it correctly. It's common to the performer to explain afterwards that the trick worked because of one of these reasons: everyone chooses this option, people aren't so different, the number of choices is psychologically limited, people are predictable and easily influenced. Most of these explanations are false, in some cases they're partially true – the variety of methods used is endless and shady – but what's interesting is the way these tricks shatter ones perception of themselves as an individual capable of original thought. Because we never truly know why we make choices that we make. The mind is used to the chain of cause and effect, so we look for answers in the strangest places. Similarly, in the situation of a room, there is a limited number of objects that one can look at and take as examples, but even if one does not draw inspiration from the things in front of their eyes, there are still objects chosen more often than others, and the list wouldn't even be that long. When somebody is asked a question, what that does is open up a space that needs to be filled with an answer. Respectively, when one creates a problem for oneself (in a sense of artistic or philosophical problem), such space appears and requires a solution. An example object is just an object that comes into that space easily.

In order to explore this abstract space that an example object is taking up, let's take a look, firstly, at art, especially conceptual art, because its main focus is ideas rather than means. As conveying a concept is more important than producing a unique aesthetic object, this renders the object insignificant, yet still necessary: the ideas have to be situated around something. *One and Three Chairs* by Joseph Kosuth, one of the

foundation pieces of conceptual art, consists of a chair, a photograph of the same chair, and a dictionary description of a chair. But of course, the work is not about a chair. Through the sixties and seventies Kosuth has made many works in One and Three Objects series: one and three tables, shovels, coats, hats, pans, lamps, photographs, clocks, saws, boxes, plants, mirrors and so on. Which almost exactly makes the list of objects most commonly used as examples in all kinds of contexts, from philosophical ideas to grammar. These are the objects I want to talk about, these are the things that appear without being called, that come uninvited, as if they are always naturally already there, just waiting to be used. The fact itself that the chair is the one that made its way into the history and collective memory is a curious and mysteriously archetypal one.

The problem of choosing the object is part of the specifics of any art that deals with the problem of concept versus the visual. This is especially true to the language related art, or the kind of art that signifies rather than depicts: for example, Rene Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* (better known as *This is Not a Pipe*) addresses questions of representation, signification and paradoxes of the perception of real and fake, but for these issues to be addressed there needs to be an object to depict. It is hard to explain why it's specifically the pipe that the painting is not – in other words, why the pipe was chosen. To make an artwork work on the levels it is intended, it could be any other object instead of a pipe, so the pipe is an example of any other object that could have been painted. Would it be the same if the object was different? In fact, Magritte's other version, *This is Not an Apple*, for some reason isn't as famous as the iconic pipe. I suspect one of the criteria of selecting a seemingly random object for such work might be functionality. There is a specific function to a pipe, because it was created by people, to people, and in the mind it creates vivid images of its use. The apple has no real function (to a human being) except to be eaten, but one could argue if that was intended. Besides the lack of function, an apple has its mythology, its biblical connotations, which might be a bit too ornate and unnecessary association for this basic idea. A pipe is man-made, smooth and wooden – it's pleasant to look at, pleasant to hold and uncomplicated. It's one of the reasons why something hand-sized would be used to represent an idea: usable objects are closer to us, but at the same time, the more often we see the object, the more trivial and insignificant it seems. They are part of our surroundings - we stop noticing them just as we don't notice our own bodies, which confirms the idea that a tool, or any man-made thing is, in fact, extension of the body. Magritte, when talking about the difference between his painted pipe and the real one, has said that you can't stuff it with tobacco – he was emphasising the function, too. Functionality is also mentioned by Joseph Kosuth, as he speaks about his object choice:

"I used common, functional objects - such as a chair... <...> By changing the location, the object, the photograph and still having it remain the same work was very interesting. It meant you could have an art work which was that idea of an art work, and its formal components weren't important. I felt that I had found a way to make art without formal components being confused for an expressionist composition."

Function is definitely important for these example objects, because isn't it function that makes a man-made object what it is? Sometimes, although not always, it's visible in the language itself: an eraser erases, a sharpener sharpens, a printer prints - these objects don't even have other names that wouldn't define them

through their function. But it's not only that. It seems to be really important that they have been produced by people, touched by human hands, have a value and can be bought or sold – that as well makes them more human. They become items, instead of an undefined piece of nature. This is why the apple isn't so haunting as the pipe. A chair, as well, is an ordinary functional thing that can be found in almost every household, is simple, has a universal design (ergonomic in its very nature, by humans for humans), and is part of the world that we have created for ourselves. Because all of those things – lamps, chairs, tables – we almost forget that none of them are natural, they would stop existing if we stopped making them, and I think this is an important reason why we are so attached to them.

Certainly, each household item that has a defined task attributed to it is bound to have a set of associations. Those associations are part of its context. If an object is not performing its task, it has a certain strangeness to it, and that is what attracts the imagination – it seems out of context. As I said before, our things are like our own body parts to us – we don't notice them so much, unless they are detached from the body (taken out of context). Being aware of the thing alienates it. It's like sudden awareness of having hands or feet or sexual organs can evoke strangeness and disgust. The function of man-made things keeps them close to our body - for example, a chair takes another, existential meaning when it's empty. Empty chair is not being used, and that brings a whole story: it's an invitation, a challenge: „here is a place for you”. It is an absence: “she's not here anymore”. As soon as it is used, it loses itself, it is not important any longer (imagine an image of an empty chair, and then an image of a person sitting on the chair. It is not about a chair anymore - now it's a portrait. The one with a stronger presence wins the situation).

In a discussion, if one needs an example of an object, they are very likely to say something „from the lamp“ - just look around them and pick the first thing they see. Maybe that's the reason all the gaps in abstract ideas are filled with furniture or hand-sized tools. Our environment is influencing us, unless we violently resist and struggle to come up with an original thought. If we collected all Kosuth's One and Three Objects, we would have ourselves a nice furnished room with some useful equipment. The room is the new nature for us – things in it are indistinguishable part of the way we think and feel, almost a kind of role models – home appliances enter our subconscious and become totemised, like animals and plants used to be. Indeed, they are always there for us, camouflaged in reality and ready to jump in as soon as our minds open the slightest gap. This gap might be, for example, a short trancelike state when one is in hesitation, or a slight confusion in the middle of the speech when a word is forgotten. There are other ways to induce the gap: here is an excerpt from *The Doors of Perception: Heaven and Hell* by Aldous Huxley, where he describes his experiences after taking mescaline. Reflecting on how objects appeared to him he talks specifically about a chair:

“I was looking at my furniture, not as the utilitarian who has to sit on chairs, to write at desks and tables, and not as the cameraman or scientific recorder, but as the pure aesthete whose concern is only with forms and their relationships within the field of vision or the picture space. But as I looked, this purely aesthetic, Cubist's-eye view gave place to what I can only describe as the sacramental vision of reality. I was back where I had been when I was looking at the flowers - back in a world where everything shone with the Inner

Light, and was infinite in its significance. The legs, for example, of that chair -- how miraculous their tubularity, how supernatural their polished smoothness! I spent several minutes -- or was it several centuries? -- not merely gazing at those bamboo legs, but actually being them --- or rather being myself in them; or, to be still more accurate (for "I" was not involved in the case, nor in a certain sense were "they") being my Not-self in the Not-self which was the chair."

The experience of a chair here is closely related to the whole experience of being in the room, experiencing the room. As all the objects reveal their "true self", the chair rises as the one that on the normal circumstances would be most ordinary - just ordinary enough to be worthy talking about right now. Objects like that have a certain quality of being ordinary, being obvious – their lack of character is the thing that helps to fill the gaps smoothly.

Coming back to art, I think it's impossible to mention conceptualism and Kosuth without going back all the way to the beginning of the legitimising of mass manufactured object in itself in the art world – Marcel Duchamp and his ready-mades. The idea of the ready-made, the challenge it imposed on the minds of the general public was that an artwork, physically, could be anything – neither skill or originality matter, even authorship is questionable. Kosuth writes:

"With the unassisted Ready-made, art changed its focus from the form of the language to what was being said. Which means that it changed the nature of art from a question of morphology to a question of function. This change – one from "appearance" to "conception" – was the beginning of "modern" art and the beginning of conceptual art. All art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually." (Joseph Kosuth, *Art After Philosophy* (1969))

A ready-made is a tool that represents all those things, but once again, if you strip off the aspects of representation, reproduction, signification, the challenge, the ways it changes the understanding of what art is - there is still the object itself that remains, and it has to be chosen. In an interview Duchamp himself described the specifics of choosing an object like this:

„Repetition is always dangerous. And it always worried me, because I could have created several ready-mades a day. To avoid that, I limited myself to producing only a few each year and the choice of the ready-made was not to be based on aesthetic criteria. Which means that I wanted to avoid prettiness. It's very hard to choose something totally neutral as a source of aesthetic pleasure. That was the problem."

True, if absolutely anything can be a ready-made, the point of creating one (or many) is lost. However, when he says that the choice was not to be based on an aesthetic criteria, I think it's inaccurate – avoiding prettiness is also an aesthetic criteria. So this limitation he talks about is not only limitation of the amount of artworks, it's a kind of self-discipline: ability to navigate between the natural tendencies and the intellectual goals, detecting one's own inclinations and reversing them if needed, not letting oneself go too far, being constantly aware of how, and why. It's pure mind-work, as opposed to what Kosuth calls expressionist composition. I think this self-awareness might be a reason why Duchamp hasn't made any chairs, nor tables



or lamps for that matter, even though that would be the easiest material for a ready-made. The reason for that is because a ready-made was always more than just an idea gap-filler. While Kosuth with his chairs and lamps is aiming to the very fabric of reality and representation, Duchamp's objects are celebrating all the complex mythologies they have around them, the more the better. The proof is that the ready-mades were almost never named after themselves, but had titles functioning as enrichment. A snow shovel, for instance, was called *In Advance of the Broken Arm*. These objects were part of bigger stories rather than a meditation on meaning, some of them had titles inscribed on them, some were combined with other objects (assisted ready-mades) or in some way altered – they were always more than just themselves. When Kosuth exhibits a chair, it's only a chair - not even that - it's a concept without narrative.

How important is the actual meaning of such object or the connotation it has? A rose from Shakespeare's quote „That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet” could not be replaced by a rock or a carrot. Here, the typical features of a particular object are necessary to make the sentence work. The rose is indistinguishable from its smell just as it is indistinguishable from all its mythology, romanticism and beauty, because it is in the context of *Romeo and Juliet*. Even though it is used as an example here in order to illustrate that it's not the name that matters but what the thing truly is, paradoxically the rose itself is of undeniable importance here – with its colour, smell, thorns, and everything that it reminds of. There is no way it could be a carrot (even if a carrot by any other name would be as orange, it wouldn't truly convey the message Juliet is expressing here). So perhaps Kosuth's chair is only a chair, but on the other hand, when Kosuth exhibits a shovel, it isn't just a shovel anymore - because Duchamp did it first. This is how hard it is for an object to escape its history, context and a set of associations. Even though the chair or the pipe or the shovel are not intended to symbolize anything, they inevitably have all those back stories attached to them, they are never alone.

Of course we are aware that the object itself, like a letter in a word, does not carry those meanings for real, whatever “for real” means. Probably the advantage of a chair or table is that they have relatively little of strong mythology, or perhaps, so much mythology that it becomes a blur and does not matter anymore. A chair and other example objects are a bit like basic geometrical forms: even though the eye, the sun, the earth and many other things are shaped like a sphere, the sphere itself doesn't really represent those things. It's a container, not an object but its shape - it remains clean outside of all the stories it has participated in, in order to be reused in the future again and again. A sphere as a form is eternal, as much as it is common. The chair and the lamp as well participate in the world as such shapes, a kind of “always there” things, possible to use whenever needed to explain principles of reality.



FIG. 1

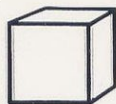


FIG. 2



FIG. 3



FIG. 4

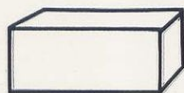


FIG. 5



FIG. 6



FIG. 7



FIG. 8

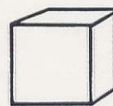


FIG. 9

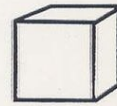


FIG. 10



FIG. 1

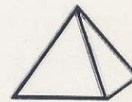


FIG. 2



## White Edges

I have several childhood memories related to interaction with some particular things as well as their interaction with each other, which I find quite telling about the ways the objects are understood through their depiction, as well as how they should or shouldn't be handled. Naturally, these memories being from childhood, they concern the pretend worlds.

I remember encountering a Lego brick with a picture of a banana on it. It was probably Lego Duplo, a version of Lego for smaller kids, which toys had less detail, slightly rounded edges, therefore minimised choking hazard. The brick was a standard rectangular one, though vertical, and was supposed to represent a banana – in the Lego world it was a banana, which for me was incomprehensible. I couldn't get over the fact that it is a brick with a picture on it – it didn't have a shape of a banana nor any other implication on why would it be a banana – you could have scraped it off and draw anything else you wanted. That kind of eliminated the need to have such a toy as an object at all – if any brick can be any object, why not just make a bunch of blank bricks with possibility to draw on them. If the only thing that indicates a brick is a banana is the picture, why don't just write the word „banana“ on it. I understand that the toy was made for little kids who can't read or draw properly, and perhaps I was simply too old - but in theory, the idea itself for me was very frustrating, because it somehow disobeyed the rules of toys aspiring to mimic reality, but also didn't go all the way to being an abstract set of bricks that become anything a child wants in her imagination – no, it insisted to be a banana, even though it clearly was a brick. And you were supposed to feed it to the Lego monkeys and people, which were, by the way, real statuettes, with heads and legs, that enabled them to function in the world. Frustratingly, it made true interaction impossible. Lego people usually have claw-like hands to be able to hold objects, which shows that the manufacturers know how important it is for children that their characters can take things, use them, hold on to them; in fact, Lego is all about connecting things to each other. But there was no such way to interact with a banana-brick. It could only be attached to other bricks, thus becoming a part of architecture, being here or there, lying around, but not used or eaten or played with. The idea of a fruit is trapped in it and not being let out. The child has to be satisfied with a symbol, which renders equally symbolic all the actions related to its shape and other qualities – holding a banana, eating it, peeling it, putting it into a cake, slipping on a peel becomes peeling a brick, slipping on a brick and so on. So many tactile actions have to be imagined instead of being acted out, that the whole game play becomes too abstract for reality - it might as well just fully take place in your imagination.

If the banana is completely abstracted and stripped off of its physical qualities, can't be handled, used or anything else, the only thing that a drawing truly indicates is value – a brick has a value of a banana. It means that it is to be used in situations where the presence of a banana is needed. If a Lego monkey is hungry, a Lego worker should take to him a banana-brick with his Lego zoo truck, and the monkey is not hungry anymore – but that's all a brick can do: participate in the transaction. It becomes a kind of currency. Same with other things on bricks: fruits, tools, a telephone, a bucket of fish, flowers, even money. None of

them can be really used in a way that real things are used, nor even in a pretend way - they only symbolize the presence of a fruit, a tool, a fish. I'd even say they represent property: meaning that the fact of having a thing matters more than using it. Say, if a flower-valued-brick is present on a windowsill, it means it must be a cosy house (no matter the colour or arrangement of flowers, there isn't any choice anyway). The appearance, the presence of a thing-brick like that somehow changes status, the state of being – a house is indicated as cosy, a monkey is indicated as fed. A Lego worker is considered to be able to fix things if he has a brick with „tools“, a hammer and saw combined – but he can't take those tools in the hand, can't kill someone with a hammer or use a saw as a musical instrument. Life is abstracted to known options, without subtlety of detail: basically reduced to having or not having, a thing present or absent - sometimes a thing in motion, when it represents a cargo. In a way it reminds of a game of Monopoly, where property is bought and sold, but never actually seen, for it's entirely just a concept. That's very different from a game where one is acting out situations with characters, interacting with their surroundings, so details and peculiarities play a big role in it.

Only smaller things were abstracted into such bricks – houses and cars remained fairly elaborately sculpted and functional. I often found myself thinking, where this abstracting begins and where it stops - why, for example, not have babies depicted on bricks, if they are more or less the same size as household appliances and doesn't do much except for being present – a baby, as well, is a thing to have, and a thing that changes status. But it's not being done, because being painted on a brick is degrading – it limits an individual, so it's not done to individuals - people and animals are not treated this way, because they are potential characters in action, they are action figures; and being a brick prevents any action – a symbol does not act. Sometimes several objects would be combined on a brick, like different fruit. It meant that the only way one could play with it is treating it as an arrangement of fruit stuck together, a kind of demonstrative still-life, and that prevents so many potential narratives: an apple, banana or grape could never have their own different applications or adventures.

This prohibition to interact, this reduction of things to the immobile emblem was probably the thing that bothered me the most about this – and the same feeling echoes in another memory I want to tell. As a child, I often used to play with paper cut-outs that I had cut from various magazines, old postcards or my own drawings. The idea was to have a character that would go through adventures, easy to manipulate, interacting with the world around, roaming through the magazine backgrounds. Sometimes I would use stickers with cartoon characters, which was convenient, because a sticker was a kind of cut-out already, so I wouldn't have to do much work. But most of such stickers had a white edge around them. This edge, a kind of line around the object or character, was very thick sometimes and fine and delicate other times, which for me put a sticker in a certain place on a scale between useful and useless. This white frame was a strange thing – it always detached the character or object inside of it from the outer world, and it wasn't always necessary as an aesthetic decision. The way I personally saw the purpose of a sticker was to compose sort of situation collages, for example: you could stick a tiger on a postcard of a city so it would appear that a tiger is walking the streets. But this white edge, this frame prevented it from happening – the tiger would always look like

not belonging to his environment, and full illusion was never achieved. I was once explained that the purpose of white edges was to make a figure less fragile when it's peeled off the paper, especially if it had details that would be hard to cut out, like tiger's whiskers. But even when the object wasn't complicated at all, the white edge would still be used, probably out of stylistic inertia, and that would bother me a great deal. For example, if I wanted to depict two tigers fighting, one's white „bubble“ would always overlap another's, and there was no way they could come in contact. The three-dimensional equivalent of this would be to wrap all the toys in thick transparent plastic, and then give them to children to play – if these flat figures would be considered to be toys (which they were to me). That might be even worse than an object-brick, which is a weird cross between two-dimensional and three-dimensional, but at least with a possibility to choose between the two. I remember spending considerable amounts of time battling with these white edges of stickers, trying to cut them off, but it was difficult, for it would indeed damage the shape, so in the worst case I'd paint them over with the colours of background, which never looked very good, because the character would still appear to be surrounded by a strange aura, reminiscent of radiating heat.

The thickness of this white edge would range from a thin protective layer around, which would more or less allow object's autonomy, to a thick blob, more a background than a frame, only slightly resembling a shape of the object, that begs a similar question like the banana-brick: why not just go all the way and make pictures on rectangular cards, instead of lousily imitating that the object is a separate thing, autonomous from the background. It seems that the function of the edge is to turn an object into a graphic sign – the more visible the edge is, the more evident it is that the object is for sure a two dimensional representation of something that it signifies. It is as if the whiteness represents the paper it was drawn on, which is a proof of two-dimensionality. A couple of years ago, in the streets of Vilnius they started changing traffic lights into new ones, that were the same but surrounded by a similar white edging, made of metal much like the road signs. Besides simply making a traffic light more noticeable in any background, what it also did was turned it into a sign – it was like claiming that it isn't a random object found in the chaos of environment, but it belongs to a category of road signs, and should be treated as one. Funny that the fact that a traffic light is a three-dimensional object didn't interfere with its flattening into a graphic depiction of itself: as a result, it's a road sign depicting a traffic light, but the traffic light depicted in it is in fact a real one. As I said before, a symbol does not act, work or have adventures – all it does is symbolise, but it seems that this traffic light manages to do both, pretending to be real and pretending to be fake in turns.







## Bending Spoons

"There is no spoon". Since the famous scene in *The Matrix*, a spoon has become a symbol of the unreal, therefore alterable reality as well as mind's power over matter. Once again, it matches the characteristics of the ideal object for this by being trivial, common, somewhat unimportant, but becoming elevated above the usual merely by the power of concentration (could it be that it is simply attention that pulls the extraordinary out of the ordinary?). If reality isn't in a true sense real, it makes sense that it is much softer than it seems - the bending spoon is a metaphor of that, a transition from unchangeable solid to the movable liquid, flexible, elastic - a shift of mind from the fixed to the changeable. But the origins of the spoon as a paranormal object go further back in time, to a self-proclaimed psychic Uri Geller, who got famous in the seventies for claiming to have psychokinetic abilities. At the time he has appeared in many TV shows in USA and Europe where he demonstrated his skills for audiences: the idea was that he seemed to be able to bend, break or otherwise manipulate metal cutlery with only the power of his mind. It was not limited to spoons - watches would stop, forks, keys, nails would seem to bend in his presence too, without any physical force applied. Why did such a ridiculous, even absurd activity should and did impress, or to ask a better question - why did it matter? Geller was finally proven to be a fraud, but it had no effect on the creation of the bending spoon myth, and there are people to this day who believe he had supernatural powers.

What is the big dream of psychokinesis? Why is it important to be able to affect objects without touching them? I would say that, besides the obvious appeal of something miraculously defying the laws of physics, it is a step up from a manual control of things. If being able to take, move, push, hit or seize something with a hand is the most direct sign of power over it, what telekinesis offers is the utopian idea of not needing even that mediator. It not only suggests that one is invisibly linked with the physical world through the mystical fields that unite us all - it also suggests that it is so natural for these objects to be controlled by you, that the gesture of the hand is actually not even a necessary in-built part of the experience of physically affecting something - one's will alone is enough. Let's say, for example, the action of picking up a cup consists of the wish to take a cup, a will to raise your hand, actual raising of the hand, moving it towards the cup, incorporating a cup between the fingers, seizing them firmly in order not to lose the cup, and moving the hand (with a cup) upwards. In an ideal telekinetic situation, parts of a sequence after willing to raise the hand would be skipped. Essentially, it is a shortcut. If we assume that a telekinetic is in a higher stage of human development, hands are like little extra wheels on a child's bicycle: with enough practice, when the time comes, they can be taken off. The ideal of true power is handless, beyond the physical, the power of pure will. Behind these little strange actions lie big utopias, hopeful ideas: that man is a superior being, that there are unrevealed potentials in ourselves, that evolution is not over and one day a different world is going to come, perhaps the world of pure spirit, or pure mind, transcending and outliving the material - all these

enormous new age narratives are encoded in a buckling spoon (with such a huge charge of expectations, it would be surprising if it didn't buckle).

Another thing that I find interesting about this spoon-bending idea is that the choice of objects is actually blatantly suspicious - notice that even though the hands are not used, the objects remain hand-size and very hand-related: spoons, forks, watches - the most manipulatable ones around. These things happen to be the ones really easy to alter physically, so attempting to alter them with one's mental powers is somewhat pointless. I mention this not in order to debunk the supernatural, but to draw attention to the paradoxical nature of such practice - what Geller and the others used to demonstrate was not the impossible, but perfectly ordinary, only achieved "the hard way" - without using hands. On many instances, in fact, the hands were used to some extent - even though the effect was claimed to be purely psychic, physical contact with the object was nevertheless necessary. Actually, it serves as a kind of reminder that the extraordinary is never far away from the ordinary, as even is implied in the word itself: former cannot exist without the latter, is a variation of the latter. Psychic metal bending as an ability is essentially pointless - unlike other shady branches of the same family like clairvoyance or remote viewing, it even can't be attempted to utilize in criminalistics or warfare (hypothetically). Yet why does it continue to fascinate, if it doesn't change anything and doesn't mean anything? Precisely because it has no function, other than to transcend the mundane.

Even though the objects used are, as I said, anyway easily manipulatable, strangely enough this is exactly the reason why spoon bending is believable. The territory of operation, much like in close-up magic, is an approximate square meter on the desk in between the hands and under the very eyes - an area that's very personal but also universal, for it is where so many every-day things happen, work and play. We feel that we are so familiar with this microcosm, that nothing in it can get out of control, so the irregularities happening before your very eyes become completely convincing as supernatural. A spoon is a regular inhabitant of this microcosm, familiar, to put it simply, from the every-day soup eating experience. We have seen and experienced these objects being handled, held and broken many times, to the point that it's second nature to us. We know how a spoon lies in the hand, we can imagine its consistency, and that makes its transformation much more believable. We can relate to this more than to something we have never even imagined. In magic - I mean illusionism - the same rule applies: the more ordinary is the object used, the more magical the experience. It has to impress by what it does, not by what it is. If the object used in a magic trick looks special, specially designed, made for the occasion, it is immediately suspicious. In close-up magic, which is a form oldest and closest to the spectator, best effects are achieved using familiar objects like coins, bills, cigarettes, rubber bands or cards. It's very different from stage magic, where one knows that most of the objects and devices shown are probably props, even though is unable to tell how exactly they work. It's an essentially different experience when one takes something out of present environment, a thing just lying around, pulls it out of the everyday surroundings and makes it do something remarkable for a couple of seconds - one thing that it suggests is a skill of the performer ("only a magician can do this with an ordinary

object"), but there is also another side: the idea that ordinary reality has something hidden in it ("that object is ordinary, it means anyone could do this"): a locked potential that exists in all every-day things, no matter how mundane. As if every little thing has secret features, and once those are unlocked, reality itself becomes alterable - for every such thing is the symbol of a bigger system, like non-existence of a spoon means non-existence of everything, therefore bendability of a spoon is really bendability of everything.

Magic, as well, is a shortcut – it appears to skip certain actions in a chain of cause and effect – something appears somewhere without traveling, something changes without alteration taking place. Both psychokinesis and close-up magic (practically the same thing, only the latter without ambitions to be real), besides their aspirations to amaze, are essentially a study of handling objects, and inside that, study of every-day movement. To extract the extraordinary out of the ordinary, one has to study the ordinary: natural movement, casual actions, thoughtless actions; take note of what is unimportant, what is usual; and avoid the unnatural, except when used in ones favour. It is only like this that it is possible to transcend the ordinary.



## Promises of Card Magic

There are no other colours but red and black

There is no middle ground but face up or face down

That which is face up is true

That which is face down is constantly shifting

That which is lost will appear again

That which is destroyed will be restored

That which is yours will come back to you

Chaos may disturb the order, but not its components

Your touch matters

Rituals work

Sometimes there will be jokers

## The Fight

Taking sides is inevitable. Even though sometimes the exact boundaries might blur, there has always been tension between the subject and the object, caused by the mere fact that there exists animate and inanimate, me and them, this and that, consciousness and matter. If there are two sides, it's easy to imagine them one opposite of the other – a natural feature of a dichotomy. That naturally leads to the idea that they disagree, they exist in a confrontation, and the side you are not on becomes a rival of your side. It's hard to believe that the opposite party doesn't have thoughts and intents towards yours, as yours definitely has towards them. This mirror principle, a certain symmetry, makes us project our own intentions onto the world of the inanimate, and create ourselves an illusion of something that in reality just isn't happening – active consciousness of objects. As it is in the opposition, it's probably an enemy. This act of wishful thinking, if it can be called that way, creates a state of mind that considers opponent's intentions real and at the same time knows they can't be – suspension of disbelief alternates with suspension of belief. As long as it's symbolic or magical, such animation of things does not seem dangerous, but in its extreme, this state of mind has a paranoiac flavour, and is never too far from a mania. It is the division that leads to suspicion towards otherness. That way the inanimate objects can gain power over us that we ourselves voluntarily give them, referring to them as something detached from us, different, belonging to another world.

The first difference between the world of objects and the world of living creatures seems to be this: we are conscious, they are not. It would seem that in a confrontation between aware and unaware, conscious and non-conscious, the conscious one would win. If the sandwich always lands on the side with butter, and the cat always lands on its feet, what happens if you strap the sandwich on a cat's back? No matter how we wished it to be so, the result is not the cat and the bread spinning in an eternal whirl an inch above the floor. The cat will win, because it's alive and conscious. It has a will, and makes a decision to land on its feet. This perhaps boring but realistic version of the joke is actually a hopeful one: it suggests that conscious actions do beat Murphy's laws, randomness and chaos, and we are able to fight against the blind Inanimate with our own will and reason. There are, however, occasions when the opposition is stronger, merely because of the laws of physics or the circumstances (cat's will may not mean anything if bread has a size advantage, etc.) Fate itself, just like objects, is inanimate, reasonless, and inexplicable, therefore objects seem to be instruments of this fatality. The eternal human struggle with the material world is as well the struggle with fate, trying to answer the eternal question - is life completely what you make it, or is it in the end shaped by the outside forces? Perhaps because of this the inanimate possesses some kind of secret that bothers us – lacking traits that we have, like awareness and mind, it is nevertheless existing without any excuse, just like that, challenging our own way of being.

In Jean Paul Sartre's *Nausea* (a novel that quite naturally makes its way into this topic, as it was so important to me during my adolescence and later) a lot of attention is given to things. Things that are all

around, all the time. I think it is very proper that it is through the everyday objects that the existential horror first manifests itself to Roquentin, the protagonist; it strikes right into the most common, the most seen, the unavoidable. Objects of routine, of rooms and streets, are the very material of physical life. Starting with a little stone by the seaside, a cardboard box holding a bottle of ink, a glass of beer; the existential nausea slowly engulfs almost everything that is around. The very tangible existence of objects makes him uneasy, their certain qualities worry him. To him, they become a symbol of existence as a whole, an in-depth realisation of which is not pleasant, even repulsive, if not fearsome. Firstly, they appear to be having some sort of presence – perhaps not consciousness, but intention, uncharacteristic for the inanimate:

„Objects should not touch because they are not alive. You use them, put them back in place, you live among them: they are useful, nothing more. But they touch me, it is unbearable. I am afraid of being in contact with them as though they were living beasts. Now I see: I recall better what I felt the other day at the seashore when I held the pebble. It was a sort of sweetish sickness. How unpleasant it was! It came from the stone, I'm sure of it, it passed from the stone to my hand. Yes, that's it, that's just it - a sort of nausea in the hands.”

His disgust being related to the tactile contact is common in Sartre's fiction, more about it later. A mistrust of objects is one of the first signs of the coming nausea that presents itself to Roquentin. There seems to be something more to them - when he sits in a bar and contemplates the „suspicious transparency” of the glass of beer, it's a flare of this alien otherness that he picks up. „Suspicious” is the word he uses. At first, not all the objects are equally suspicious, some of them just strike him suddenly, unawares, for no particular reason – the realisation of nausea is coming in random flashes, unevenly. But the process that has started cannot be stopped, and he keeps moving the way towards the daily material paranoia:

“Still, somehow I am not at peace: I have been avoiding looking at this glass of beer for half an hour. I look above, below, right and left; but I don't want to see it.<...> ... I know there is something else. Almost nothing. But I can't explain what I see. To anyone. There: I am quietly slipping into the water's depths, towards fear.”

Shouldn't paranoia be a name given to fear post factum, when it becomes clear that suspicions had no basis? Before there is any proof, the suspicion is just as legitimate as any other idea. Fear has its object to which it is directed, so it is always an anticipation of something, in a way. His suspicion isn't even formed, or nameable, but it is directed with all its intensity towards the everyday objects, that conceal, cunningly, their conspiracy.

And indeed, material things are all around, all the time. How could one ignore them - although somehow one constantly does - their eternal presence, all-enclosing, insistent, tiring like the existence itself. Is there any way out, if it is them that our environment consists of? Is there is any place without an object, whether it's man made or natural? The overwhelming way in which things surround us is underestimated. We are surrounded. They are everywhere, and they are more than us in quantity, and often in quality. They exist in all areas of life like a strange, massive, mute army. True, we say we created them – but each of us

separately knows that he hasn't. We have no idea about how most of them work, how they're made, sometimes we don't even know what some of them are for; we couldn't replicate one. Many of us are completely out of touch with their manufacturing process, which is therefore surrounded by mystery and almost suggests an independent intelligence, for it is something that seemingly happens by itself. Not being directly involved in the creating of objects alienates them, and we become something like their step-parents rather than parents – we don't really know them. It is no coincidence that the classic sci-fi scenario about the uprising of the machines keeps repeating itself over and over in fiction. It represents fear of the revolt of your own children – which is, in fact, happening every day on a minor scale, quietly: as something you are trying to create resists its own existence, as things like blank pages and canvas are able to scare you, as your dinner burns up, as the knife slips and cuts your finger, as the machine does not validate your bus ticket, as the computer stops working last days before the deadline. Every time your kitchen knife slips, it's a gentle reminder of their advantage: your skin is soft to cut, and you are mortal – unlike stainless steel. The revolt of the inanimate is always present.

I am not trying to say that one day gadgets and appliances will gain consciousness, rise and kill their masters. No, that's not going to happen, for that would be a resolving, a luxury for the mundane. What's going to take place instead is what's already taking place: quiet disapproval, constant, lukewarm and passive, on the verge of hostility. Like gloomy teenagers, the objects say: we didn't ask to be created. They only obey because of your repeated insistence – as soon as you stop putting petrol in your car, it stops going; broken things do not heal but remain broken; hot meal eventually gets cold - everything can't wait to return to their passive state after you're gone. Roquentin as well comes to a similar realisation towards the climax of the novel, looking at trees in the park, as he realises that things exist just by a kind of inertia:

They did not want to exist, only they could not help themselves. So they quietly minded their own business; the sap rose up slowly through the structure, half reluctant, and the roots sank slowly into the earth. But at each instant they seemed on the verge of leaving everything there and obliterating themselves.

If there is any force behind the reason why things (alive or not) continue existing, that force is nothing but inertia, inability to stop. Remember, for example, *The Way Things Go* by Peter Fischli and David Weiss, which seems such a joyful video piece, as objects actively and amusingly perform their roles in a chain reaction. However, they are doing it only because they were placed in such positions that disabled their resistance: their passivity was used, directed and turned into action through clever arrangements using their own weapons - laws of physics - against them. *The Way Things Go* is a triumph of the rational awareness over the passive inanimate, a big forced spectacle for our entertainment, where the objects are circus lions - the only difference being that they don't growl against their trainers in fierce humiliation.

That's because they can't be humiliated. Even Roquentin, who is equally disgusted by people as by objects, might make fun of people's ridiculous actions and gross appearance („the couple who were eating opposite to me last Sunday in the Brasserie Vezelise. Fat, hot, sensual, absurd, with red ears”), but he never makes fun of things – they intimidate him much more, for they don't have shame or guilt. They are immune



to injustice - that's a very big advantage for an opponent. The existence of inanimate objects is only raw and bare, without emotion, and since we naturally attribute emotion to everything, we do not perceive such emotionlessness as a natural thing, but interpret it as a certain coldness, cruelty, entering a territory of an enemy.

In Sartre's fiction, the handling of objects is a reoccurring topic. „From time to time objects start existing in your hand“. An object that suddenly starts to exist is similar to, say, a fruit that starts to move in your hand before you notice it is full of worms - it's a startling and slightly traumatic experience, making one throw the object away as quick as possible. Perhaps it's not so unexpected that thinking about existence itself what comes into attention is the tangible world, a direct way to feel existence. The tangible might be the most understandable manifestation of reality for us: we pinch ourselves to find out if we are dreaming, or we touch things to make sure it's not a hallucination (doubting Thomas). Objects, things, seem to be scattered pieces of existence, crystallised into lumps, reality turned thick. For Sartre's character it evokes disgust, because it's a really intimate way to interact with objects, perhaps too intimate, as the improper intimacy is able to evoke disgust. Not every way of contact is right, there are special actions to be avoided. "Objects are not made to be touched. It is better to slip between them, avoiding them as much as possible. Sometimes you take one of them in your hand and you have to drop it quickly." It seems that if one holds them for too long, there is a chance one might merge with them, or perhaps get contaminated, because what they radiate is intense and contagious.

In a short story called *The Room*, the main character Pierre scorns the way people handle things. He says they grab them with their fingers and then press them with a palm as if preventing them from running away – dealing with the world of things should be a more delicate issue than that, precisely because of the danger this interaction involves. Pierre is a madman, but this is not a reason to discard his way of seeing things. He lives in a room and that is his environment, as good as any other environments. His room is a universe, a physical extension of his mind, where unexpected attacks can happen, words appear on walls and espionage intrigues are going on. As his girlfriend Eve hopelessly tries to infiltrate his world, she attempts to live by his rules not fully understanding them – when he claims that „he was warned“ not to use this particular fork this time, she gives him another, but as soon as she thinks she begins to make sense of why, it slips away. His issues with touching, gesture and movement seem to have mysterious truth. In case of Pierre, there is a whole world behind every action, of which the appearance of objects are just signs, tips of the iceberg above impenetrable depths. With his objects, the unseen always has to be taken into consideration, mostly because it is hostile - his objects are agents and tools of the evil forces, and he is in constant danger if he doesn't handle situations correctly.

Giorgio Agamben in his essay *What is an Apparatus?* writes about division of the world into two large groups or classes, that are: living beings (or substances) and apparatuses, in which living beings are incessantly captured. In other words, there is always something imposed on the individual from the side of the apparatus. According to this division, an apparatus can be pretty much anything, and any inanimate object is a part of an apparatus. He includes under the same category things like schools, madhouses, media,

confession, but also pens, writing, agriculture, cigarettes or navigation – because an apparatus is a network of relations between things rather than a thing itself. In the original idea of an apparatus, described by Foucault, it is defined by always being inscribed into a play of power, because, in words of Agamben, it „has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions or discourses of living beings.“ Apparatus is always one way or another related to control.

Agamben also distinguishes a third class in between the two, which is subjects. The subject, he says, is something that results from the relentless fight between the living beings and apparatuses. The idea that it is a fight has been long established – from the beginning of tool use a human became entangled with apparatuses. The difference between the substance (living being) and subject is this: apparatuses subjectify the substances, because when the individual becomes in some way involved with an apparatus, he can then be defined as a subject, a user of an apparatus. In other words, being involved with an apparatus actually makes one into something, it has an impact on how one is defined. I think it's this that creates a certain resistance of an individual. Agamben himself, for example, seems to have an intense, a bit irrational hatred for mobile phones, which interrupts otherwise quite calm theoretical text with a sudden flash of emotion, as he suggests to punish or imprison cell phone users.

It is true that the confrontation with the inanimate object world is inseparable from confrontation with technology. It isn't completely passive - it's more like a combination of passive things made into something active, much like *The Way Things Go*, which can be considered a machine. Certain higher level of activeness makes it closer to a human being than a simple, passive object. And this anthropomorphism is exactly what makes it so treacherous. A technological object is an object that aspires to be more than what it is - it's the trickiest of them all. Where it liberates, it also enslaves. The most traditional example of this, probably, is the introduction of machines into production of commodities, the automatising of work. As was well put into words by Karl Marx:

“In handicrafts and manufacture, the worker makes use of a tool; in the factory, the machine makes use of him. There the movements of the instrument of labour proceed from him, here it is the movement of the machine that he must follow. In manufacture the workers are the parts of a living mechanism. In the factory we have a lifeless mechanism which is independent of the workers, who are incorporated into it as its living appendages.” (Marx, as quoted in Highmore)

This is the typical situation where the inanimate object, the machine, is in control even though the original intention was to use it for human's needs. It appears to serve, while at the same time has other plans. Every human attempt to enslave the object ends with this strange compromise. Serving the people is never pure - the technological object appears to be always having second thoughts. For example, once again the mobile phone: when we talk to it, we are really talking to a mobile phone – a person on the other end is actually no more than a metaphor, even though we tell ourselves we are talking to a real person. Their voice is a symbol of them, but it isn't them - we talk to a piece of plastic. Through the disguise of communication convenience the phone tricks us into talking to it – an action completely absurd, even degrading for a rational

being. When virtual reality helmets or glasses are portrayed in science fiction, it's never forgotten to point out how odd the user's behaviour looks from the outside, as opposed to the hyper-real and exciting inside experience. Such image is always slightly dystopian, showing people completely and grotesquely addicted to technology. To someone who's not in it, it's just a helmet, a meaningless object. Internal adventures outwardly get reduced to an absurd looking actions. Similarly, people that are always staring into their mobile phones are often used as an example of how alienating modern society is, when essentially, it's just as true as writing a love letter is staring to a piece of paper and moving the hand. Which it visually is. Anyhow, a mobile phone is one of those objects that are more than just a transmitter of information, for they also pretend to be what they aren't. These objects have taken to themselves certain abilities of a live being, as if inevitable amount of natural animation we give them wasn't enough. A radio, an object that talks, similarly tricks us into listening to its produced sounds by using as a bait information that we like, so does TV, in a way computer, and the most treacherous of them all: camera - the seeing object, and microphone - the hearing object. So it does make sense after all to be careful around things, to be paranoid in this case isn't to exaggerate: some of them do have rudiments of a live being. That which can see, can blackmail – perhaps not literally, but there is indeed a whole different way to relate to an object that can see. In Foucauldian sense, observation is control and control is power. Sometimes they cheat and they pretend to be other, harmless things. Just recently in a photography museum I was looking at a collection of cameras that looked like cigarette packs, lighters, pepsi cans. In order to be trusted, the technological object has to pretend to be a regular object. These are Trojan horses sent behind the enemy line. They help just as often as they betray. They trick us, because we are so accustomed to judge objects by their appearance, categorising them as dangerous and safe, useful and not, that in order to not be fooled by this disguise one has to be a complete paranoiac. This is true warfare, with spies, strategies, disguises and traitors. And in this kind of conditions, actually, the paranoid one is the best adapted one.

Lighter-cameras or dagger-shoes, however, are just an exaggerated example of the objects of anxiety, which is caused by the idea that inanimate things contain something inside them and refuse to share it. In the case of gadgets, hidden cameras and secret weapons, their secret is quite easy to explain - it's either the power of transformation or the power of observation that they contain. But there is always something more, even in the most innocent objects. Something unknown. They always belong to a bigger system, whether it's aesthetic world, mythology, or usability. But even as individuals, detached from whatever context, they do emanate something towards the one that interacts with them. This feeling is similar to that of a secret we are not let into. Frustratingly, they are silent, tricky and refusing to cooperate. Agamben comes to a conclusion that there is no easy strategy for this struggle – we can't destroy apparatuses, but we also can't turn them to a radical advantage. The worlds of animate and inanimate are to remain in a constant battle which has no winners: with natural laws being on their side, objects forever passively resist; with inventive rationality on their side, humans forever try to tame them.







## Paperclip

And this is how a paperclip made it's way into a museum of mineralogy. Museums, besides their other functions, are machines of categorising - and in this case the category is very clearly defined, even one-sided, for it is very material based. The mineralogy museum is fairly different from the ones of art or history: while many different objects could be displayed in said museums under various disguises, the mineralogy museum only welcomes minerals. It would be impossible for objects that are not minerals to penetrate this strict system of organisation. And yet surprisingly, the paperclip got in, and it is displayed under the glass if not quite as an equal, then equally visible, in all its absurd glory. The fact that it's there is not cheating: it got in with the help of its most natural features. Obviously, magnetite attracts metal - paperclip is made of metal. This unique but invisible feature of magnetite is exactly the thing that defines it, so it had to be visualised for the museum-goer. The paperclip was introduced more as an example of something made of metal rather than a meaningful object, but it is through it that magnetite can fully reveal itself and be defined. In union with the stone, they create a presence of a third entity - the magnetic field. As a result, we have this guerrilla-style occurrence, a kind of mockery of the museum system itself: a little piece of trivial office life incorporated into the world of natural minerals. The paperclip is a spy, it functions as a kind of double agent, belonging to both worlds and somehow succeeding not to offend any of them. It defies the rules and yet it's completely honest - without any disguise, without trickery, not pretending to be something else than it is (unlike the lighter camera).

What the paperclip does, is it doesn't go against, but goes around the rules of categorisation, finding a kind of legal gap. Its innocent, absolutely legitimate display amongst the minerals is possible, because it is happening next to the rules or, to put it in a better way, it obeys the unwritten rule. "There are more things"- things that escape naming and categorising. Pauses, intonations, inhaling sounds or stuttering are a part of language, but are not to be found in a dictionary. If a paperclip can be exhibited amongst the minerals, it means we do not know everything about exact internal workings even of our own systems.

"In some ways everyday life is an archive 'yet to be catalogued', an archive that might also resist cataloguing. Inexhaustible and boundless, everyday life offers unmanageable resources that provide little guidance to the appropriateness of approach. Attempts to manage the everyday through systematic procedures and scientific attention have, perhaps, added to the 'secret' of everyday life by a studied avoidance of its mysteries." (Ben Highmore: Everyday Life and Cultural Theory)





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**MAGNETITE**  
(Pedra-Iman)

Magnet Cove, Arkansas

E.U.A.



## Stay still, still-life

They say: two is a couple, three is a company, four is a party. When several objects come together, the birth of stories is inevitable. In these new accumulations, each part is a fragment of a previous combination of meanings it used to belong to, and coming together, each with their history, they form a new combination all over again. These clusters of objects can be found everywhere in the everyday environment, and there is something natural about the way they form: they accumulate in people's houses like dust, they grow unnoticed, like mould. The motives behind their existence differ: some of them consist of discarded things, some are composed according to convenience of accessibility. Some combinations are brought together by the fact there is no other place these objects belong, others come together precisely because they are all so often needed.

I do call these constellations still-lives - unintentional ones perhaps, but nonetheless no less symbolic, and no less physical. Physicality is very important in a genre of still-life: by physicality I mean the here and now presence of objects, whether it's expressed through likeness and almost-tactile surfaces, like in crispy clear realities of Dutch still-lives; or analysis of shape and perception, like in cubist ones. When I say still-life, I mean, first of all, a display - an arrangement of inanimate things to be looked at (painting is a way of looking, too), and as well arrangements of things that just happen to be looked at (anywhere). Any group of objects can be called a still-life, because essentially that's what it is, with aesthetic, symbolic or semiotic filters applied. Every day, for example, in a store or a supermarket, someone buys a combination of objects, and they all symbolise: it's possible to tell what are person's needs, certain lacks in their home, if they have a family, allergies; even foresee recipes. However, playing a detective can be deceitful and lead to misunderstandings, hence the infamous urban legend about a middle-aged couple buying a cucumber and a tube of vaseline, which I have heard from several friends as they quoted somebody who supposedly saw them for real. Even though who am I to say this was a misunderstanding, the point is that the stories are not inscribed in the objects themselves, it is us who attribute them. To be more exact: no story or meaning is completely immobile, but meanings of separate objects are less loose than that of a new accumulation, which lets the new meanings be born in confrontations, combinations and relations of the old ones. For example, an onion and a knife means cooking, but an onion and a contact lens might mean crying. The onion reveals its other feature, as the two objects affect each others signification. The more objects there are, the more complex the signification of the group. Like words in a sentence, they shift their meanings in the context of others.

A moving black belt of a supermarket constantly displays one hastily composed still-life after another, the iconology of which is both fixed and open to interpretation - fixed because of meanings formed by history, open because we can have our own; fixed socially, open individually. The symbolism of course isn't so strict as it used to be in 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch still-lives – a deck of cards doesn't necessarily signify the dangers of gambling and earthly pleasures, rotting fruit – the unavoidable decay. But allegory was only one of the layers even in those times – less visible narratives spoke about trade, colonialism, and wealth, as well

as what was exotic and what was usual. With Dutch still-lives there were two sides of the coin: while they could be a reminder of temporality and death, they could also be a way of demonstrating wealth and prosperity. In the contemporary everyday context, rotting fruit are far more likely to signify surplus, waste, discounts or failed marketing. If vanitas had death coded into familiar objects to remind of the inescapable demise, an interesting thing happens with the supermarket still-lives: they are capable of doing exactly the same, yet not because the objects will decay, but because of the contrary: you will be outlived by them. Plastic is the new memento mori - unbreakable, mockingly timeless. However, the moving-belt-lives, sliding slowly before your eyes as perfect displays, some large, complicated and luxurious, others poor and cheap, representing their masters just like they used to; were not designed to symbolise, teach or remind - they do so reluctantly, without intending to, because in the human culture nothing escapes meaning. Everything is language - because reality obeys the rules of language and vice versa - and so commodities, as well, are a kind of code.

A “still-life” that is a message can be a carefully arranged composition, but it can be a cluster as well. There is going to the field and picking a bunch of wild flowers, and then there is ikebana - the result of both of them will be bouquets, even though very different. I think a cluster has every right of the intentional composition, and can be just as well readable. According to this kind of logic, not only contents of a shopping bag, but also trash in the corner of the street, fallen leaves on the sidewalk, and the way lipstick and keys fall out of the handbag in relation to the beer glasses on the table is a message. Much like telling the future from the animal’s guts, accidental still-lives are borderline to divination, which is yet another way of communicating: looking for message, reading something that isn’t words. For example, patterns on a jaguar’s fur, like in that short story by Jorge Luis Borges (The Writing of the God).

There is an interesting passage that can be found in Gulliver’s Travels, in which Gulliver tells about the customs and peculiarities of the city of Lagado, part of the land of Balnibarbi, where he travels a while after the more well known adventures in the lands of giants and dwarves. He visits the School of Languages, where three local professors are discussing about how to improve their country’s language. They propose several projects:

„The first Project was to shorten Discourse by cutting Polysyllables into one, and leaving out Verbs and Participles, because in reality all things imaginable are but Nouns.

The other Project was a Scheme for entirely abolishing all Words whatsoever; and this was urged as great Advantage in point of Health as well as Brevity. For it is plain, that every Word we speak is in some Degree a Diminution of our Lungs by Corrosion, and consequently contributes to the shortening of our lives. An Expedient was therefore offered, that since Words are only Names for Things, it would be more convenient for all Men to carry about them, such Things as were necessary to express the particular Business they are to discourse on. <...> ... many of the most Learned and Wise adhere to the New Scheme of expressing themselves by Things, which hath only this Inconvenience attending it, that if a Man’s Business be very great, and of various kinds, he must be obliged in Proportion to carry a greater Bundle of Things

upon his Back, unless he can afford one or two strong Servants to attend him. I have often beheld two of those Sages almost sinking under the Weight of their Packs, like Peddlers among us; who when they met in the Streets would lay down their Loads, open their Sacks and hold Conversation for an Hour together; then put up their Implements, help each other to resume their Burdens, and take their Leave.

But for short Conversations a Man may carry Implements in his Pockets and under his Arms, enough to supply him, and in his House he cannot be at loss: Therefore the Room where Company meet who practice this Art, is full of all Things ready at Hand, requisite to furnish Matter for this kind of Artificial Converse.”

It is interesting that the idea of leaving only nouns in the language naturally led to its reduction to objects. True that the first things we learn is names, therefore it's easy to believe that language is essentially that, names for things. According to Walter Benjamin, human language isn't the only language that we know of, but it is the only naming language that we know of. The linguistic being of man is to name things, therefore, material things and words are interchangeable. One turns into the other, as in case of Swift's story. We compose of words as if we would compose of things - citizens of Lagado, who practice that type of speaking, would be live composers of a kind of impromptu still-lives, arranging and rearranging them according to the situation on the spot, a bit like travelling magicians. They physically carry their vocabulary. It's fascinating to envision this type of speaking. Such conversation, I imagine, would have to involve a great deal of dramaturgy, because the way the message is being communicated is not only through positions of things in space, but also through change of these positions in time - because the meaning appears in a sequence of things happening one after another. It would involve a great deal of choreography, too, because it's hard to draw a line between necessary handling and artistic gesture. It's a pity that it hasn't been described how the meanings of particular objects would be set - would they be agreed upon during the meeting before the New Scheme comes into effect, or are they supposed to be self-evident. Surely, it couldn't be entirely tautological, some system of signification would be needed, for some things would need to symbolically stand for the ones that aren't possible to carry around. Interestingly, because language, as we know, shapes one's scope of perceiving the world, this type of communication would keep the discourse very down to earth, both literally and figuratively, as it omits many abstract ideas. A person would be limited to converse only about his particular Business, and that doesn't let one's thoughts rise higher than the ground, above the material. Could they have an intelligent colloquy without any abstract concepts at all? Swift doesn't talk about how philosophical it would be possible for these conversations to get. However, he depicts the „room for practicing this art” as quite a refined place and refers to the practitioners as „sages”, which suggests that perhaps the idea he's proposing is that limitation does not equal regression, and sophisticated does not equal abstract. What kind of subtleties and depths can be reached only by mutely manipulating matter? It is unsaid, and we can only speculate.

Another thing that I find fascinating about this story is a tireless, insistent attempt to make everything communicate. Even the in-built human tongues are not enough - under the guise of „protecting the lungs”, one wants to be able to use every-thing and any-thing to say something. The idea of sign language, a system that doesn't affect the lungs and doesn't require always having stuff, is completely ignored. Without a need

to carry many things or have strong servants, everyone would be truly equal, using their own pair of hands. But that would leave objects without any signification, letting them be themselves - this cannot be allowed. Essentially, the inanimate is silent – but we don't accept it. Our nature insists that there has to be a language of things which they communicate with, not only as mediators, but also as themselves, as they are the essence of language (according to the Three Professors, all things imaginable, the Nouns). In his essay *On Language as Such and the Language of Man*, Benjamin writes:

„Language itself is not perfectly expressed in things themselves. This proposition has a double meaning, in its metaphorical and literal senses: the languages of things are imperfect, and they are dumb. Things are denied the pure formal principle of language - namely, sound. They can communicate to one another only through a more or less material community. This community is immediate and infinite, like every linguistic communication; it is magical (for there is also a magic of matter). The incomparable feature of human language is that its magical community with things is immaterial and purely mental, and the symbol of this is sound.“

Silence (of things), the opposite of sound, however, does not signify the absence of meaning to us. We demand a translation from the language of things, because every evolved language <...> can be considered a translation of all the others (Benjamin). Such translation is not only a translation from the mute to sonic; it is also the translation from the nameless into name. This intense preoccupation with the message of everything around makes me think of what Jean Baudrillard called the empire of meaning, while talking about the animals in *Simulacra and Simulations*. Silence, the non-speaking, is something that the animal world and the object world have in common. I think it is very important, because speech is how human characterises himself and anything lacking speech is inadequate in the humanly world. Human civilisation is constantly bothered by it, for it doesn't fit in its systems. In this memorable excerpt Baudrillard argues that the reason behind animals being used in laboratory experiments and exploited in factory farms is, in fact, that it's a kind of interrogation – he even compares it to inquisition. The true function of this abuse is to make them talk:

„They, the animals, do not speak. In a universe of increasing speech, of the constraint to confess and to speak, only they remain mute, and for this reason they seem to retreat far from us, behind the horizon of truth. But it is what makes us intimate with them. It is not the ecological problem of their survival that is important, but still and always that of their silence. In a world bent on doing nothing but making one speak, in a world assembled under the hegemony of signs and discourse, their silence weighs more and more heavily on our organisation of meaning.“

Making them talk doesn't even mean making them say something - if they did, who knows if we would listen - just talk, signify, make an effort of communication, do not be neutral, random, silent, incomprehensible. The laws have to be applied, the rights, the duties - and how can they be applied to the mute, the inadequate, unaware, without responsibility. Animals never have any guilt or fault, which in the human understanding of the world makes them innocent and always right - in a way that a victim is always

right - yet how can one be right without participating in the system at all? And this is why they have to be made to talk, to confess, to stand for themselves.

Benjamin, as well, talks about mute nature, as he analyses the creation myth in the book of Genesis. When Adam was created, he gave names to all the things, and it was a kind of second creation of the world, in a very human way. Nature was not given this power to name - and so because it is mute, nature mourns. Nature has a possibility to be called, but no power to call. Not only it has no naming power but it was named by a secondary source - a man - instead of being directly named by God, because for God every thing was its own name, world was a language already, in itself. According to Benjamin, man's naming of things is overnaming, and this unnecessary action is what is the source of all suffering and deliberate muteness of nature. In the Bible, linguistic advantage is the first and main advantage of a human over nature, a token that he is the master of all things. Therefore speechlessness, Benjamin claims, is a great sorrow of nature, and even where there is only a rustling of plants, there is always a lament. Baudrillard's animals are made to suffer, because they don't signify; Benjamin's nature suffers, because it's made to signify.

A still-life is a kind of tool that makes things signify, as they are vulnerably displayed for seeing. Dead animals, as well, appear in classic still-lives, lying alongside the fruit as hunting trophies, equal to the other objects, blurring the line between a live creature and food product. Death is the quickest way of objectification, a straight path from animate into inanimate, and animals for us provide this missing link - from a subject, alive to dead, to inanimate, to an object. „The only good Indian is a dead Indian” - the only animal that communicates correctly is a dead animal. There is a reason for a name dead nature or even still nature, because what doesn't move doesn't resist, doesn't impose its own unpredictable meanings on our organisation. Signification is beyond control of the signifier.

So in the end, everything in a still-life plays their roles: the dead ones and the ones that have never been alive now are all parts of the same sentence, letters in a word, and everything speaks, everything performs.

What is essential is that nothing escape the empire of meaning.







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### **List of illustrations:**

1. Collage of Google images search results depicting Plato's cave allegory, specifically the vase. The results are from different languages and range from book illustrations to children's drawings.
2. The Rhodes Collosus, drawn by Edward Linley Sambourne in 1892.
3. British wartime poster. Picture taken in Museu Colecção Berardo in Lisbon.
4. Violence against celestial objects with the help of optical perspective.
5. Illustration from Gulliver's Travels.
6. Some perspective trick pictures that demonstrate childish joy in the violence against the bigger turned smaller - playful humiliation of people, revenge against the monuments.
7. The pipe depicted as one of the basic forms in Marcel Broodthaers' Pipe et formes académiques (Pipe and Academic Forms). Enamel on plastic relief, 1969/1970
8. The chair out of context. A chair, paper. Work and picture by Juste Venclovaite
9. A traffic light in Vilnius. Picture by Juste Venclovaite
10. A Lego-Duplo brick.
11. A New Day Begins, from the series Equilibres. Peter Fischli and David Weiss, 1985
12. When You Cut Your Finger, Bandage the Knife. Joseph Beuys, 1979
13. This is not a lighter. It's Camera-Lite, a miniature photo-camera manufactured by Suzuki Optical Works between 1950-1955. In Porto Museum of Photography, picture by Juste Venclovaite
14. Cameras that do not look like cameras. In Porto Museum of Photography, picture by Juste Venclovaite
15. Magnetite. Mineralogy museum of University of Porto. Picture by Juste Venclovaite
16. Combinations of objects as found in the kitchen. Everyday still-lives in my grandmother's apartment. Picture by Juste Venclovaite

